

Rankin County authorities provide alternatives to juvenile detention

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Seven Rankin County teens under Youth Court probation supervision are part of the Sheriff's Department's running team scheduled to participate June 30 in Gov. Phil Bryant's 5K Run for Health.

Most of the youths had been in trouble multiple times. The running team was organized in an effort to steer their energies down a different path.

The running program is the most recent in a series of alternatives to detention utilized by Rankin County officials as part of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Rankin County's JDAI deals with juveniles whose cases are awaiting adjudication before the Youth Court.

The runners practice three times a week with Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey, Chief Deputy Ken McBroom, Rankin County Juvenile Detention Center Director Lt. Eric Fox and other law officers. Bailey and some of the officers will run with the teens in the Governor's Run. Their goal after the 5K run is to participate in the half-marathon event of the Mississippi Blues Marathon in January.

The Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative is a national program which seeks to eliminate inappropriate or unnecessary use of secure detention, minimize re-arrest and failure to appear rates pending adjudication, ensure appropriate conditions of confinement in secure detention, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and redirect resources to sustain successful reforms, according to Gloria Salters, state co-coordinator for JDAI.

Rankin County is working to reduce its recidivism rate, Bailey said. Authorities want to reduce the number of youths who get into trouble over and over. Many adult offenders got into trouble as juveniles. The JDAI program seeks ways to address the problems which cause juveniles to commit offenses, in an effort to prevent repeat offenses and to prevent crossing over into the adult criminal system.

Detention alone isn't a deterrent, Fox said. "If I continue putting him in detention, I'm ultimately going to put him in prison someday," Fox said.

"If we can find something on the front end to curtail it or stop it, it's going to help our county," Bailey said.

Bailey said training for and participating in the race are an opportunity to teach the teens about setting and achieving goals through hard work, discipline, and sticking with something.

It's also an opportunity to find and develop talents and interests. Only one of the team has previous track experience. Two of the team have done extremely well. Deputy Michelle Rhodes, who started the running program, plans to try to get them involved in school track activities, Bailey said.

"Everyone has a talent or interest. It's just a matter of finding that talent or interest," Bailey said.

Five Mississippi counties participate in the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Adams, Leflore and Washington counties were the original pilot sites starting in 2008.

Rankin County became involved in the program in 2010, said Assistant Attorney General Patricia Marshall, state co-coordinator for the JDAI project. Harrison County will kick off its program July 13.

Harrison County Court Judge Margaret Alfonso, who presides over the county's Youth Court, said, "JDAI is a national initiative to improve the juvenile justice system. The mission is to improve the juvenile justice system without compromising public safety....JDAI is built on the foundation that secure detention is to be used for those who are a danger to the public, or a flight risk." Juveniles who are neither a danger to the community or a flight risk can benefit from rehabilitative programs without being in confinement.

Judge Alfonso said she looks forward to having the training and technical resources which the JDAI program can provide. The program will work to promote collaboration within the juvenile justice system, and to help participating entities better utilize the resources they have.

Initial funding for the three pilot counties came from the private, non-profit Annie E. Casey Foundation. The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention provides continuing funding through a Juvenile Accountability Block Grant administered through the state Department of Public Safety Division of Public Safety Planning, and the Casey Foundation provides some funding, Marshall said.

Rankin, Adams, Leflore and Washington counties all saw decreases in the numbers of juveniles detained during the 2011 fiscal year, according to Salters. Rankin County saw a 4.2 percent decrease; Adams, 5.1 percent; Leflore, 12.6 percent; and Washington County, 11.2 percent.

Counties participating in JDAI use a systematic approach to evaluate all cases to determine whether a juvenile should be detained while awaiting adjudication by the Youth Court. A risk assessment tool utilizes a point system that takes into account the nature and seriousness of the offense and other factors. The point score on the risk assessment determines who should be detained, released or supervised in an alternative program.

The risk assessment evaluation process helped Washington County reduce the number of juveniles held in detention, said County Court Judge Vernita King Johnson. However, she said there is work to be done toward reducing the number of juveniles who are taken into custody.

Judge Johnson said that in Washington County, African-American juveniles are taken into custody in disproportionate numbers. Ninety-eight percent of the juveniles who are brought to the Washington County Juvenile Detention Center are African American; the population of Washington County is about 65 percent African American, Judge Johnson said.

"We want everyone to get equal treatment regardless of race, class or culture. We want that in our juvenile justice system. We want it to be a neutral setting," Judge Johnson said. "We want to deal with the offenses. We want to deal with the circumstances. We don't want to deal with race, class or culture because that should not come into play with regard to what to do with this child or that child. A child is a child."

Rankin County utilizes an electronic monitoring system and GPS tracking for some of those released under Youth Court supervision, according to Rankin County JDAI Coordinator Dawn Mapp. Juveniles who qualify wear ankle bracelets which track their

whereabouts. The juveniles are able to remain in their current school setting and receive community based services while ensuring public safety and personal accountability.

Since February, juvenile officers with the Rankin County Sheriff's Department have organized a series of life skills presentations for youths in detention and on probation. "We want them to be successful," Fox said.

A Metropolitan Bank officer talked to youth about credit. A representative of Temp Staff gave tips about job hunting and interviewing. The Brandon Fire Chief spoke about careers in the fire service. Talks have included etiquette and appropriate behavior with members of the opposite sex. Other programs included discussions about drug abuse, drunken driving, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Some of the juveniles on probation have also served as volunteers feeding the homeless at a shelter. "The purpose is to teach them that you need to help others, and you are not as bad off as you think you are," Mapp said. "It's also a way to engage the youth in community service and giving back."

The Rankin County Area Extension Agent recently visited the detention center to talk about the importance of agriculture in the state's economy. By fall, juveniles in the detention center or under Youth Court probation supervision may begin learning how to grow vegetables. Two high tunnel greenhouses have been ordered through a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant, Mapp said.

"Eventually it will provide some of the food the children who are detained will be eating. It's also to teach them how to grow crops and feed themselves," Mapp said.

Juveniles got a lesson in horse sense during a June 13 program. Horse trainers set up an arena near the Pelahatchie detention center and put two highly trained Tennessee Walkers through their paces, including kneeling and later picking up and returning one of the owner's hat. Then they unloaded a green yearling Quarter Horse and showed the youths a style of pressure, release and reward training.

Professional horse trainer Paul Thompson drew a parallel between working with juveniles and horses. "If I overpower them with pressure, they shut me off," he said. "To question is OK, but rebellion is out of the question."

Thompson, a former Pelahatchie resident who now lives in Rocky Face, Ga., worked through catching, haltering and leading the horse. He waved and draped ropes, garbage bags and tarps to get the horse accustomed to sights, sounds and sensations. His training style holds the horse's attention, makes him understand, and rewards his efforts. After about an hour's work, the horse stood as Thompson waved around a loud running chainsaw, minus the chain.

"If you are willing to put the time and effort in the right way, you will get positive results," Thompson told the crowd. "We are going to get control of him without physically hurting him," he said as he worked with the horse. "First comes trust, then a little understanding, and now respect."

About 25 people including young probationers, parents, staff and visitors watched from tents beside the arena. About 25 detained youths sat under tents inside the detention center's chainlink fence.

A Flowood couple whose children are on probation said they would use the equine

demonstration as a teaching moment for their son and daughter, who were under house arrest after being caught smoking marijuana. “We are going to talk to them in the car on the way home and say, ‘This is what we are trying to do with you. There are consequences to your actions,’ ” the woman said.

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